

4-2017

Self-Made Freak: The Exceptionalism of General Tom Thumb, The Celebrity Body, and the American Dream

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Recommended Citation

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Self-Made Freak:
The Exceptionalism of General Tom Thumb, The Celebrity Body, and The American Dream

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in American Studies from
The College of William & Mary

by

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Accepted for _____
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)

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May 03, 2017

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— *Joint Venture* —

“Those who did and those who did not attend the wedding of Gen. Thomas Thumb and Queen LAVINIA WARREN composed the population of this great Metropolis yesterday, and thenceforth religious and civil parties sink into comparative insignificance before this one arbitrating query of fate —

Did you or did you not see Tom Thumb married?”¹

— *The New York Times*, 11 February 1863

Amid the Civil War, a wedding—

Amid all the disunion and discord of a grand and bloody fight for national union and identity, one month post-Emancipation Proclamation, a new bond—the wedding of two celebrities: Charles Sherwood Stratton, known as his stage name “General Tom Thumb,” and Lavinia Warren Bump.

“No one need be surprised that two little matters should create such a tremendous hullabaloo, such a furore of excitement, such an intensity of interest,” wrote the *New York Times*. Its grandiose, sweeping 5,200-word article glorifying the union of “our Lilliputians” occupied the eight-page newspaper’s full cover page.² When these dwarf freakshow stars married, Americans considered their nuptials the year’s society affair.

Thumb’s celebrity wedding, in February 1863 at the height of the Civil War, stood as a celebration of union amid discord—an affair with which Americans were enamored.⁴ Media eagerly anticipated the wedding of Thumb to Lavinia Warren, a dwarf from a well-established family who left her job as a schoolteacher to work on a Mississippi showboat and later joined Barnum’s employ. *Harper’s Weekly* bought the rights to take official wedding photographs for

¹ “THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS; WARREN-THUMBIANA. Marriage of General Tom Thumb and the Queen of Beauty. Who They Are, What They Have Done, Where They Came From, Where They Are Going. Their Courtship and Wedding Ceremonies, Presents, Crowds of People. THE RECEPTION THE SERENADE.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

² “The Loving Lilliputians.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁴ Lavinia M. Magri and Sylvester Bleeker. *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb (Some of My Life Experiences)* (Hamden, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1979): Chapter 2.

their cover in advance, and President Abraham Lincoln even hosted a honeymoon dinner for the couple at the White House.^{5, 6}

This essay seeks to explore bodily difference's cultural significance at a time when the freak show took center stage in the theater of American amusement, while modern American capitalism took shape from the Antebellum era to the Gilded Age. Why did the wedding of two freak show performers enrapture the nation? In seeing and talking about Thumb, Americans interrogated disability's entanglement with American cultural identity, national unity, and the evolving relationship between individual body and capitalist economy.⁷



⁵ Eric D. Lehman. *Becoming Tom Thumb: Charles Stratton, P.T. Barnum, and the Dawn of American Celebrity*. (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2013), 174.

⁶ Magri and Bleeker. *The Autobiography of Mrs. Tom Thumb*: Chapters 2, 4, and 7.

⁷ "General Tom Thumb's Grand Wedding March," composed by E. Mack. Respectfully dedicated to General Tom Thumb & Lady." Sinclair lith., Phila., ca. 1863. Philadelphia: Lee & Walker. [IMAGE DESCRIPTION: The cover of a sheet music booklet of a march composed for General Tom Thumb's wedding. The cover features a lithograph of the couple in wedding attire, standing among other ladies and gentlemen, perhaps at the wedding reception. The wedding attendees look at the newlyweds and at each other, engaged in conversation—while the couple looks directly ahead, peering out of the sheet music at whoever may pick it up.]

General Tom Thumb's wedding operates as a pivotal moment in which American celebrity acts as a public performance engineered to advance capitalism's mechanisms of profit, power, and advertisement. Alongside engravings of the married couple, newspapers depicted and credited businesses' wedding gifts to the newlyweds; these associated their social status with their wares—ultimately acts of self-promotion that predate modern celebrity product endorsement.

What created this advertising opportunity, however, was General Tom Thumb's artificial celebrity construction. I explore Thumb's elevation from gawked-at, consumed circus deviant to important figure of the American upper-class. To understand this elaborate evolution, I examine Thumb's 1844-47 European tour, during which European aristocrats confirmed his status by receiving him at their homes. Artists and journalists created souvenir objects to commemorate these moments and circulate these stories, which became sought-after commodities and mementos to freak show visitors. These visitors not only departed shows with their conceptions of Thumb—rather, they also shared these souvenir photos, coins, and booklets, which educated Americans on his life and rise to fame.

I examine one such souvenir booklet, which may have been sold at Thumb's performances following his homecoming to the United States in 1847, and contains a collection of these European newspaper articles. These stories' incorporation serves to circulate these narratives to Americans and to reinforce Thumb's status by sharing European aristocrats' positive opinions. These exchanges of souvenir items and information reflect how people quite literally passed along narratives on Thumb's life. Additionally, *how* Americans used these items signifies these items' worth—people incorporated these as souvenirs to memorialize, collectibles to sell, paper to write on, and artifacts to preserve.

While these objects circulated farther than Thumb's presence, Americans capitalized upon his fame in popular references to educate children, debate presidential politics, and denigrate popular culture. His incorporation into the public vernacular—from schoolhouse encyclopedias to Congressional representatives' mentions—signifies that Thumb's celebrity meant very different things to many different people. Furthermore, these people used their conceptions of this man's life to even understand more of the world. Why, then, has this wedding been swept into stories of the curious rather than an American legacy only alluded to by children dressed up in 'Tom Thumb' weddings?

That Stratton's exhibition figures as an example of modern American celebrity warrants study—for its strategic importance to understanding the ideologies and assumptions that propped his social status above other more 'common' or less-celebrated freaks, as well as 'abled' Americans.⁸ In this paper, I examine the narratives of souvenirs intending to bolster General Tom Thumb's celebrity, culminating in the intense coverage of his wedding in 1863. Analyzing the discourse that mysticized and uplifted his persona, and the ways Americans saw his celebrity as an opportunity to advance their own commercial interests, I argue that their language and purpose were to establish and reinforce Thumb's celebrity by interacting with a multitude of American ideals concerning the body, gender and sexuality, social class, prosperity, and identity

⁸ Lauren Smith-Donohoe. "It's Time to Retire 'Able-Bodied'." *Lauren Smith-Donohoe* (blog), February 19, 2017. By "abled," I use terminology referring to the concept of the "able-bodied"—a term increasingly deemed inaccurate and problematic because of its emphasis the physical body, which makes invisible the experiences of people who have cognitive, sensory, developmental, neurological, and psychiatric disabilities. The diverse array of ways in which disability is embodied provoke deliberation in the disability community, and this evolution of terminology referring to people who are enabled and disabled in society reflects the rejection of the medical model of ability. In short, this term refers to the 'nondisabled.'

construction.⁹ Thus, the wedding was a moment in which we see the enjoinder of capitalism and celebrity. The fame, social status, and wealth of Charles S. Stratton—and his inseparable public persona General Tom Thumb—stand as exceptional in the context of the American disability experience, yet simultaneously a byproduct of American conceptions of national identity, leisure culture, capitalism, and the body’s role in these aforementioned spheres.

⁹ In this paper’s title, I use the anachronistic phrase “American Dream,” created by historian James Truslow Adams in the 1930s—after General Tom Thumb’s time. In this, I refer to Thumb’s prosperity narrative falling into a contemporary canon of stories used to argue every individual’s potential to better their life according to their ability or achievement: a social order in which every person may live “unrepressed” by what Adams calls “barriers erected in the older civilizations.” Thumb’s story contributes to ideologies of Americanness—citizenship, prosperity, and participation in public life—now codified into narratives on “America.”

— *Review: Interdisciplinary Bodies of Theory* —

What does it mean to be an American? How do we envision *America* embodied in places, peoples, cultures, and ideas? As an interdisciplinary field, American Studies assimilates the tools of many disciplines to engage with all the media that gesture toward people's American experiences. By adopting historical, literary, and ethnographic methods—and in analyzing media with critical theoretical perspectives on aesthetics, politics, marginalization—we pursue new and deeper understandings of American histories, politics, institutions, identities, values. Rather than a singular understanding of America, scholars explore the complicated, changing, and tense relationships between movements and people in the American sphere.¹¹

We may approach a phenomenon by examining both the peoples participating *inside* the culture—be it a national culture, or cultural groups within the scope of “America” who are included/excluded from public participation, resources, and access. I specifically examine American insiders shaping and sharing not only American cultural practices, but also the ideas supporting them. I also consider the Europeans *outside* American culture who still encounter it embodied in General Tom Thumb—who perceived and/or responded to the cultural ideas and practices that became markers of American ways-of-life. Studying culture requires exploring an exciting milieu of evidence that survives in our archival repertoire: oral and written histories, literature and legal briefs, popular and counter-culture, music and soundscape, art and idea, cuisine and tastemaking, fashion and bodily movement, ritual and religion, architecture and theater, and more.

In this thesis, I use a variety of evidence to argue that the freak body of General Tom Thumb was uplifted as exceptional—even for freaks—and commodified in the conjunction of

¹¹ For a succinct summary of American Studies methodologies, its history as a field, and what drives it forward today, see George Lipsitz's 2015 publication “What is American Studies?: An ASA White Paper.”

public business persona and personal identity. In transatlantic media coverage, souvenir circulation, cultural enshrinement, political exchanges, and media attention, Thumb's body circulated even further in narrative than his sideshow travels alone. To understand the importance of these narratives in the creation of American celebrity and citizenship, I bring into conversation theory from scholars of disability studies, gender studies, anthropology, history, economics, sociology, and racial studies. This section offers an overview of key texts from which I build my argument on Thumb's significance to the relationship between American identity and capitalism, mediated by the body in society.

Disability theory helps us to understand how both the deviant disabled and normative abled of society analyze bodies in contexts of economic, social, and power relations. The social model of disability, coined by Mike Oliver, describes the ways in which people with extraordinary bodies are categorized as deviant and then disabled by social treatment and organization.¹² In *Disability, Identity, and Representation*, Rosemarie Garland Thompson provides an example of how human-created environments disable people. Stairs disable wheelchair users; and the biased perceptions by people that the disabled are less capable of work lead to discrimination in hiring, which leads to physical and social exclusion.¹³ The social model of disability rejects the essentialization of disability as inherently caused by the body, instead pointing toward physical impairment or difference as what experts would diagnose as disability in the medical model of disability. The medical model of disability locates the individual as

¹² Mike Oliver. "The Social Model of Disability: Thirty Years On." *Disability & Society* 28, no. 7 (2013): 1024-026. In this article, Oliver considers critiques of his theory in the 30 years since its creation in 1983 and reflects on its impact on the lives of the disabled since its creation and proliferation. It is important when considering the material lives of people with significant impairments that medication and treatment significantly improve the lives of many disabled, and that social acceptance, accessibility, and equity deal with the societal barriers the disabled face.

¹³ Rosemarie Garland Thomson. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997): 7.

disabled by an impairment, and in need of a cure for their impairment, rather than a new approach to social order, accessibility, and acceptance.¹⁴

Disability as an idea lacks self-evidence or any intrinsic meaning. The concept of disability wholly depends on deviation from a *normate*, a word Garland Thompson created to refer to the conceptual ‘body’ that stands at the ideological average, a median center from which disabled bodies deviate and are given meaning. By their inability to embody the normate, people become disabled. We can proceed to see disability as a social construction, which has many theoretical genealogies in philosophy, critical theory, and more. Useful here is the sociological theory of social interaction, a theoretical framework that examines the symbolic meanings (subjectivities) that people impose on objects, events, and behaviors.¹⁵ This theory, succinctly summarized, argues that people acting toward things (physical objects, social objects, and abstract objects) informed by the meanings that those things have to those people interacting with them. Meaning derives from social interaction and results from subjective interpretation. The individual identity, then, is a socially constructed understanding. The ways that people have presented bodily deviance from a valorized normate in the freak show both build upon and revise people’s understandings of what it means to have different bodies, and affect how people envision these unique bodies as agents in society.

Ability resides in social dominance—it constitutes a normativity defined by its oppositional relationship to the extraordinary body. This discourse creates a sense of bodily selfhood, and the display of otherness in the freak show evokes a sense of identification as more ‘normal’ by audience members. By constructing a range of *others*, the dominant center

¹⁴ Shakespeare and Watson contest the dualism of *disability/impairment* in their 2001 article “The Social Model of Disability: An Outdated Ideology?” to which Oliver (2013) responds in his 30th anniversary reflection on the model.

¹⁵ Herman Blumer. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 1992): 2.

constitutes itself as normative and empty in that it has no definition possible to precisely name without a dialectical boundedness of exclusion.

The ambiguity of ‘disability’ becomes evident when we consider how it has changed across history to include and exclude different social groups based on social attitudes that place these groups outside the norm. Hysteria and homosexuality, for instance, were ailments that specifically centered upon and stigmatized social groups, and which are no longer officially recognized today as medical conditions. Historically, hysteria referred to women’s symptoms including anxiety, fainting, insomnia, irritability, nervousness, and sexual promiscuity—its indefinability and application to white married women of a higher class signifies that these women’s failures to live up to their social roles was then conceptualized as a character flaw of hysteric illness, codified into early medicine.¹⁶ French scholar Michel Foucault posits in *History of Sexuality* that pre-18th century cultural discourse on sexuality centered upon the married couple’s reproductive capacities, underscoring its importance to governing systems and power.¹⁷ In the 18th and 19th centuries, however, Foucault argues that Western scientists questioned sexualities that did not fit within the productive married union—specifically, queer sex as well as sexual fetishes.

The American Psychiatric Association (APA)’s declassification of homosexuality as a kind of mental illness in the 2nd edition of its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1973 also reflects changes in how homosexual behavior became diagnosable for its social undesirability. The APA pathologized homosexuality as a disease, a condition

¹⁶ Cecily Devereaux. “Hysteria, Feminism, and Gender Revisited: The Case of the Second Wave.” *ESC: English Studies in Canada* 40, no. 1 (March 2014): 19-45.

¹⁷ Gary Gutting. “Michel Foucault.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Online): April 02, 2003.

deviating from the healthy ‘normal’ state of heterosexual sexual behavior.¹⁸ Gay activists lobbied for doctors to determine homosexuality using the Theory of Normal Variation, which treats homosexuality as a naturally occurring phenomenon, and this pressured the APA to declassify homosexuality from its former categorization as a ‘sexual orientation disorder’ in 1987.¹⁹

Homosexuality’s transformation *into* mental illness occurred in the 19th century, at the same time in which Western scientists categorized biological organisms based on their evolutionary origin and observed behaviors—driving the need to diagnose abnormality. In “When Homosexuality Came Out (of the DSM),” Dr. Vivek Datta describes the social act of diagnosis-making as “the ritual of making a diagnosis as a performance that occurs within the social space.” The symbolic allotment of experiences into ‘symptoms’ and ‘signs’ of disease or disorder also assign social meaning—not only for those who are labeled, but also for those who live without the label of a disease or disorder. The dual creation of the “homosexual” and the “heterosexual,” then, parallels with the dual creation of the “disabled” and the “abled.” Just as psychiatry created and polarized sexual identities in a way, medical science created and polarized ability. These diagnoses not only inform about the conditions of certain states—they also create recognizable identities and erode a complete/normal personhood.

Bodily deviance also extended to the national body, in terms of public health initiatives and eugenicist policies designed to “cure” the social ailments of the populace based on medicalized notions of people’s *fitness* to participate in public society. A citizen’s fitness—their worthiness of legal rights—was determined by their contributions to society and the state. Their civic fitness and physical ability are inextricably tied. The social contract of the American Constitution, into which people are born, presupposes citizens’ complicity with this system and

¹⁸ Jack Drescher. “Out of DSM: Depathologizing Homosexuality.” Edited by Carol North and Alina Suris. *Behavioral Sciences* 5, no. 4 (2015): 565-75.

¹⁹ Ibid.

its values—self-determination, independence, and hard work. Because disability often necessitates accommodations, cooperation, and codependence, disability unsettles these unquestioned abstract liberal ideas.

Adrienne Rich's theory of *compulsory heterosexuality* asserts that heterosexuality is also beyond question—heterosexuality is the norm. Rich criticizes this presumption, writing that “the bias of compulsory heterosexuality [is such that] lesbian experience is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible...”²⁰ Although Rich writes about lesbianism, the assumption that an individual automatically aligns with a normative identity extends beyond lesbian experiences alone. Michael Berube seeks to contextualize this concept to dis/ability studies, arguing that “the system of compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability is thoroughly interwoven with the system of compulsory heterosexuality that produces queerness.”²¹ The entangling of gender, sexuality, race, and ability in what is considered “normal” produces compulsion. Berube includes an excerpt of Michael Warner's book *The Trouble with Normal* that illustrates the hegemony of *normalcy*, which nobody can escape even if they reject the norm:

“Nearly everyone wants to be normal. And who can blame them, if the alternative to normal is abnormal, or deviant, or not being one of the rest of us? Put in those terms, there doesn't seem to be a choice at all. Especially in America where [being] normal probably outranks all other social aspirations” (53.)²²

As a field studying deviant bodies, disability studies questions the terms of bodily categorization that divide people into groups of bodies deemed *normal* or abnormal. It rejects the compulsion toward the normal body, which only comes into being by defining what is *abnormal*.

²⁰ Adrienne Rich. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5, no. 4 (1980): 632.

²¹ Michael Berube. “Introduction: Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence,” in *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* by Robert McRuer. New York: NYU Press, 2006: 2.

²² *Ibid*, 3.

Yet the modern term ‘disability’ itself did not always exist. In this paper, I retroactively apply the contemporary identity label ‘disabled’ to refer to people who would today be considered disabled—this is to examine how our contemporary notions of disability were constructed in their historical moments. I do not want to ignore the stigmatization that the labels of homosexuality and hysteria had real consequences in terms of discrimination and invasive medical treatments that would be considered ‘disabling’ in terms of power dynamics. I also do not want to ignore those persisting stigmatizations today and their real impacts on people’s lives. Marginalized social categories overlap and intersect, and therefore must be considered alongside disability as social constructions. I focus on the specific group of people whom we can find in the archive diagnosed as *invalid, feeble-minded, simpleton, idiot, moron, freak, amputee, deformed, retarded*, and more antiquated terms referring to people who would now be labeled *disabled* as we understand it—who often fall under multiple identity groups.

In applying our contemporary understandings of disability identity retroactively, I want to warn against the projection that people in General Tom Thumb’s era had this conception of disability. Rather, their discourses on what would become known as disability require more reflection and incorporation in understanding the history of how the disabled are treated today. *What preceded the medicalization of disability and the dissemination of that framework was a radically different collection of views on different bodies’ functions and characteristics: economically, socially, and physically.* The freak show’s stage served as a public education forum that displayed deviant bodies for curious audiences. Although the contemporary freak show sits on the contemptible fringe of society, from approximately 1840 through 1940 the formally organized exhibition for amusement and profit of people with physical, mental, or

behavioral deviances—both alleged and real—was an accepted and popular part of American culture and entertainment.²³

Freak show audiences' middling to low social class, combined with the decline of the freak show over time, may partly explain a lack of written viewers' reactions preserved in museum and library archives. I believe, however, that these displays of human beings present an opportunity to develop understanding of past practices and changing conceptions of ab/normality, as well as the beginnings of a grounded theory in managing the visual discourse on human difference.

Although freak shows contributed to the imagery and construction of disability in America, we may examine what surrounded the performers themselves—for instance, managers, promoters, audiences, props, and other freaks in ensemble—that occupied the same spaces and defined the margins of the stage. Some other human “freaks” on exhibit would not now be considered disabled. Non-Western, non-white people were commonly exhibited in sideshows, as were others who *performed* mental and physical abnormalities to qualify for the business.²⁴ A considerable portion of sideshow performers were novelty acts as well—sword-swallowers, fire-breathers, knife-throwers—whose talents were unusual but known as *geekery* rather than *freakery*, because they were not the product of an essentialized bodily condition.²⁵

In exploring audiences' direct reactions to exhibits, my interest is curtailed by the lack of primary material available to discern what exactly onlookers thought. Nevertheless, by examining the discourse on freakery and comparing that to narratives on General Tom Thumb's celebrity status in America, I seek to understand how Thumb simultaneously benefited from and

²³ Robert Bogdan. *Freak Show: Presenting Human Oddities for Amusement and Profit*. Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 1988: 5.

²⁴ Thomas Richard Fahy. *Freak Shows and the Modern American Imagination: Constructing the Damaged Body from Willa Cather to Truman Capote*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

changed perceptions of disabled bodies. By *discourse*, I do not refer to discussion. Instead, I use Michel Foucault's theory of discourse, in which discourse refers to:

“ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them. Discourses are more than ways of thinking and producing meaning. They constitute the 'nature' of the body, unconscious and conscious mind and emotional life of the subjects they seek to govern.”²⁶

In short, discourse is the totality of written and spoken exchanges about a subject—the ‘body’ of language that communicates information about this subject. Disability discourse, as a sphere of ideas and knowledge about disability, predates the incarnation of the term ‘disability;’ General Tom Thumb’s popularity among Americans constitutes an important part of that.

Ultimately, I view the freak show as a phenomenon experienced by many people who took part of a material journey toward understanding the self. Reactions to freakery result from gendered, classed, racialized, and ableist American socialization, and the ways in which social institutions manage these freaks’ identities. What belies the freak show is the organization and patterned relationship that others the freak and interacts with the onlooker. *Freak*, then, is not a quality that belongs to the person on display—*freak* is a social construction based on normalcy, and American normalcy is its own unique power structure with its own ideals and practices.

In analyzing souvenir items about General Tom Thumb, I examine what audiences literally and figuratively ‘took’ from these events: both items passed among friends and family members, as well as their understandings of *what, why, and how* deviance figures into American life. Travel diaries, Congressional mentions, and circulating mementos are some ways in which we examine the *discourse* around Thumb. People in the United States and across the Atlantic considered Thumb worthy or underserving of such celebrity and wealth; some continued to reject his freak body, and others thought his ostentatious wealth an eyesore. His wedding at the height

²⁶ Chris Weedon. *Feminist practice and poststructuralist theory*. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987), 108.

of the Civil War served as a heightened and crystallizing moment of this massive interrogation, during which businesses co-opted Thumb's celebrity persona to promote their own products. Examining these media, I seek to explore a different union: the creation of the celebrity body, defined by intense attention and advertisement, and the paradox of the disabled body, marked by hypervisibility and stigmatization for its deviance.

— *The Extraordinary Life of the Great General* —

“THUMB WAS BORN,

(so runs the legend,) of poor but honest parients [sic], on the 4th of February, 1838, in the pleasant burgh of Bridgeport, Conn. At his birth he weighed nine pounds and a half, so that he bid fair to become a bouncing boy. He grew steadily until he attained the age of eighteen months, when nature put a veto on his upward progress, and ordered him forever afterward to remain in statu [sic] quo.”²⁷

— *The New York Times*

Charles S. Stratton, better known by his stage name of General Tom Thumb, was a dwarf and a freak show performer who became a celebrity renowned across the United States and Europe during the mid-1800s. Thumb rose to fame in the 1840s, performed in front of over 50 million people worldwide, and visited Queen Victoria and President Abraham Lincoln, among other nobility and politicians.²⁸

In winter 1842, legendary showman P.T. Barnum visited Stratton’s hometown of Bridgeport, Connecticut; his New York-based “freak shows” were becoming popular, and Barnum was keen to meet a four-year-old “extraordinary local boy” the townsfolk talked about, reportedly only twenty-five inches tall.²⁹ The public at the time craved “freaks of nature,” according to Lord Grade, who created a 2013 documentary on Stratton’s life.³⁰ From hair-covered people to exoticized nonwhites presented as savages and cannibals, Barnum offered Americans the chance to see an array of deviant bodies in his American Museum, located in New York.³¹

This freak show drew little criticism at the time—freaks were exhibited to make money, and they were often impoverished and ostracized for lack of work otherwise.³² Thus, Stratton’s parents saw Barnum’s offer of work as an opportunity and accepted a hefty \$3 weekly pay to

²⁷ “The Loving Lilliputians.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

²⁸ Kathleen Hawkins. “The Real Tom Thumb and the Birth of Celebrity.” *BBC News* (online), November 25, 2014.

²⁹ Lehman, *Becoming Tom Thumb*: 14-15.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 26.

³¹ *Ibid*, 54-57.

³² Bogdan, *Freak Show*.

their son.³³ The four-year-old child was put on a month's trial at Barnum's museum, kitted out with increasingly elaborate costumes and a fictitious backstory: advertised as eleven years of age, English-born, and now christened General Tom Thumb, after the English folklore character. The title of general enhanced Thumb's celebrity status, similar to the contemporaneous titles that other freaks adopted: the Polar Bear Princess, the Bearded Lady Baronness, and the Ice King. These royal denominations continue to draw audiences' curiosity, exaltation, and controversy in their use by modern celebrities—for instance, Count Basie, Prince, and Madonna.

When General Tom Thumb masqueraded as canonical and classical figures of Western civilizations, he transgressed the bounds of the abnormal identity by associating the deviant with the historically respected. Audiences' double-takes, curious stares, and even leers centered upon his body as a site of hypervisibility that abled performers performing these same characters would not otherwise receive—except, perhaps, celebrities.

General Tom Thumb's simulations of the social elite elevated him to society's upper echelons as not only a spectacle to gawk at, but also a figure trafficking in what was socially respectable. Despite Thumb's recognizability as upper-class by virtue of his embroidered silk waistcoats, top hats, dress clothes, and even miniature spats for his leather shoes, his performances undermined the very cultural references his costumes evoked. His performances are paradox, for although he was recognized as *performing* upper-class life through his presentation, they acknowledged that his freak body is exceptional and attention-worthy for occupying such a classed position. His inability to 'pass' as a member of the dominant group creates a mode of representation that mocks the freak subject's powerlessness via his character and class imitations. Effectively, Thumb's performances, attire, and title undermine the categories referenced.

³³ Lehman. *Becoming Tom Thumb*, 14.



The entertainment, then, lies in the ironic pleasure of seeing the slippage between the empty imitation of the abled and the cuteness of the entire charade. The daguerreotype (left) shows P.T. Barnum and Thumb in matching suits, which served as a way to imitate the genteel upper class.³⁴ This doubling serves to reinforce his difference, while also depicting him as a childlike figure of innocence, much like a doll or child playing dress-up.

Sianne Ngai offers an aesthetic theory of cuteness, positing cuteness as an *aesthetic of powerlessness* that brings out feelings of tenderness and engages an aggressive consumption.³⁵ With the rise of media advertisement in capitalism, art and commerce increasingly overlap, obsessive adoration promotes commodity culture. Thumb's cuteness amounted to profit in performances when he would sell kisses to female audience members, capitalizing upon consumerism's desire for cuteness.

I assert that General Tom Thumb's white, cisgender male dwarf anatomy, proportionate to that of the normate, obscured the threat of his bodily deviance and enabled him to garner greater fame and wealth than that of other circus freaks. His cuteness even compelled Americans to cherish him in popular culture for years to come—upper- and middle-class families' children

³⁴ Samuel Root or Marcus Aurelius Root. *P.T. Barnum and General Tom Thumb*. Circa 1850. *National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution*, Washington, D.C. Half-plate daguerreotype. [IMAGE DESCRIPTION: P.T. Barnum sits in a chair while Charles Stratton stands on a table next to Barnum with one hand resting on Barnum's shoulder. They both are striking similar poses: Stratton, with one hand on his hip and legs crossed, and Barnum, with one hand on the chair arm and his legs crossed as well in the chair. As a size reference, Stratton is about as tall here as Barnum's torso and head.]

³⁵ Sianne Ngai. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015)

re-created “Tom Thumb weddings” for decades after Thumb’s 1863 nuptials, accompanied by audience and a reception following. Below is one early 1900s photo of this American cultural practice:³⁶



It is an understatement to point out the irony of the eugenics movement co-existing with this cultural reenactment. They are not, however, diametric opposites—Thumb’s stardom was ensured by the supposed innocence that was a byproduct of his cuteness, enabling him to transgress the freak category of the crude and ugly. He was, in other words, a freak perfectly packaged. Nonetheless, this packaging required careful transatlantic testing and endorsement.

Attuned to social dynamics as a showman, P.T. Barnum crafted Stratton into the biggest little gentleman in his persona as General Tom Thumb. Following Thumb’s hiring, his persona became his public identity—standing in place of Charles Stratton as the celebrity freak of the time. Barnum and Thumb toured Europe in the 1840s, making it to London in 1844. Eric Lehman writes in *Becoming Tom Thumb* that many Londoners prided themselves on being more

³⁶ Harris & Ewing, photographers. [*Children; Tom Thumb wedding.*] Between 1915 and 1923. Retrieved from the Library of Congress. [IMAGE DESCRIPTION: 24 children stand in a semicircle on a lawn in front of a large brick building. In the middle are three pairs of children dressed as ‘brides’ and ‘grooms,’ accompanied by another child dressed as a Christian minister of sorts. The eighteen other girls dressed in white form the arms of the semicircle, presumably also ‘brides’ in this ‘wedding.’]

respectful and dignified than Americans, Barnum worried that Londoners would find a dwarf performer crass.³⁷ Initial reception was poor, but Barnum, a master publicist, managed to learn quickly the importance of class status, marketing Thumb to the upper echelons of British society. With aristocratic endorsements, their popularity increased until they received a personal invitation to visit Buckingham Palace from Queen Victoria.

Festooned in French military regalia and embodying a miniature Napoleon, Thumb launched into a singing routine.³⁸ Since the royal court was officially in mourning for Prince Albert's father, it was a risky strategy—but nobody bade them farewell. Thumb's performance provoked a royal spaniel about as tall as him, which started barking. Quick to respond, Thumb unsheathed his saber and pretended to combat the creature. The court erupted with amusement; the duo later received an invitation back to the palace. On Thumb's 1844-47 European tour, writers and artists commemorated, circulated, and reinforced Thumb's notoriety in souvenir items, engravings, and newspaper articles that the public eagerly consumed and shared amongst themselves—which I examine in the next section.

³⁷ Lehman. *Becoming Tom Thumb*, 39-40.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 46.

— *Marrying Nation and Celebrity Capitalism* —

“The marriage of Gen. Tom Thumb cannot be treated as an affair of no moment -- in some respects it is most momentous. Next to LOUIS NAPOLEON, there is no one person better known by reputation to high and low, rich and poor, than he.”³⁹

— *The New York Times*

As we look through archives of American history, male political figures such as Benjamin Franklin and Andrew Jackson were celebrated for their success—even marketed as figures on items such as vases, coins, and other memorabilia that embodied a democratic American ethos.⁴⁰ Leo Braudy writes in the *Encyclopedia of American Studies* that after Thumb’s time, Thomas Edison and Guglielmo Marconi’s creativity and inventions were incorporated into emblems of “American careers as a national preoccupation”—yet, Braudy obscures General Tom Thumb in his summary of American celebrity culture.⁴¹ General Tom Thumb’s memorabilia falls into this American celebrity canon, yet it stands apart for its lack of political associations. Rather than a political legacy or scientific innovation, it commemorates his personhood, wealth, and fame as exceptional. At that, Thumb’s pervasive presence in American culture

figures a rags-to-riches narrative solidly into a new instantiation of celebrity.



Pictured is an 1844 souvenir medallion by Belgian society portrait artist Charles Bagniet, depicting General Tom Thumb standing among a display of items that serve to underscore not only

³⁹ “THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁴⁰ Leo Braudy. “Celebrity,” in *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, ed. Simon J. Bronner. (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2017)

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

his stature, but also his class.⁴² Produced while Thumb was on his European tour with Barnum, this material culture and other media narratives attest to how British citizens This engraved portrait characterizes Thumb in a tailcoat, waistcoat, trousers, shirt, and tie; he stands on a tabletop by books, a bottle and glass, an egg cup and spoon, and a quill and wax stamper.

Notably, he leans upon a copy of *Boyle's Court Guide*—an important British society reference book. If there was one book certain to live in the homes of every British social aspirant of the Regency era and onward, it would have been this guide. The Sir John Soane's Museum in London gives details in a placard by several of these guides in Sir Soane's collection: these country guides as published annually between 1792 and 1925.⁴³ These books contain directories of nobility's names and addresses, organized in the first half of the book by street name—to know one's neighbors or to rent a house for the season by illustrious neighbors—and organized in the second half of the book alphabetically by last name—to look up acquaintances met at social events. This was a guide to everyone “in” society (that is, the aristocracy), much like an early landline telephone directory, yet exclusively designated for people and places of repute. That Thumb's figure stands next to this organizing index of social status specifically situates him among this social group.

Indeed, the text in relief on the top side of this coin reads: “UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF THE QUEEN AND COURT OF ENGLAND.” This 1844 rendering by society artist Bagniet was commissioned after he moved to London, during the same period in which Bagniet painted Prince Albert, writer Charles Dickens, and composer Hector Berlioz. This material object shows

⁴² Charles Bagniet. *Medallion*. (Gabrielle Enthoven Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London, England, 1844) [Image description: A silver metal coin, about three inches in diameter, around the edge of which is inscribed: “UNDER THE PATRONAGE OF THE QUEEN AND COURT OF ENGLAND.”]

⁴³ Boyle's Fashionable Court and Country Guide, and town visiting directory, corrected for January 1825. Containing an alphabetical arrangement of the names and places of abode, (with the family names of the nobility) in town and country, of all the ladies and gentlemen of fashion, to which are added the Inns of Court, &c. With a list of coffee houses, &c. Soane.org.

General Tom Thumb's concrete connections to British royalty and the upper class. Around the top edge, the words "PUB: BY P.T. BARNUM AMERICAN MUSEUM NEW YORK, 1844" which seems to signify that this image, and many others like it, credited P.T. Barnum's business as a form of advertisement and identity-making.

These commemorative items modeled and molded the formation of a self-made national identity, akin to kings and aristocrats in the establishment of American moral codes and ideas on people's roles in democracy as contributors and leaders of a 'new people.' In a way, they effectively reify status by bringing these ideologies into material form. This harkening to ancient heroism paradoxically aligns these figures into the Western traditions of public and political memory, despite the Lockean *tabula rasa* that white settlers claimed gave them the power to assert and attain their will in America. In the next section, I bring into conversation a souvenir pamphlet released upon General Tom Thumb's return to the United States in which British newspaper clippings about Thumb's political reception also transmit this power across the Atlantic. Because Thumb is 'classed' in Great Britain as aristocratic, Americans perceived him as already upper-class upon his homecoming despite his freak show work.

Our disability history has been forgotten but for the special figures who predate and support the construction of the stereotypical *supercrip*, such as Thumb—disabled people who defied what little expectations society had for them, by doing what would otherwise be considered a normal activity or by 'overcoming' the figurative limits of their disability rather than simply living with a disability.⁴⁴ General Tom Thumb's fame stands to frame supercripdom before the term's creation, becoming extraordinary for surpassing social expectations of what wealth and class a disabled person may accrue.

⁴⁴ J.S. Clogston, "Disability Coverage in American Newspapers," in *The Disabled, The Media, and The Information Age*, ed. J.A. Nelson. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press): 45-53.

The contemporary supercrip model of glorification only feeds into conceptions that the disabled may overcome their barriers if they only try hard enough—rather than acknowledging the real barriers that the disabled must face in society and the physical world. In this, we see parallels to narratives that celebrated journeys of rags-to-riches and excluded disabled bodies. And yet, their marginalized status elicits story-telling that promotes reader responses of pity, terror, inspiration and fascination.

In the Antebellum era, urbanization meant the city was opaque. The desire for mobility made it ever more important to ‘read’ class on people’s bodies by their dress, manners, and mobility. Horatio Alger’s Gilded Age novels glorified stories of rags-to-riches at the same time that Charles Dickens’ Antebellum social novels interrogated social problems of prejudice, poverty, poor working conditions, plagues, and the pitiable, pathetic, destitute disabled. If a dwarf can attain respectability, wealth, and comfort, who cannot? Thumb’s celebrity was an extraordinary marker of American identity and culture, a precursor to the present-day stereotype of the supercrip. In his historical moment, Americans celebrated his life for overcoming his dwarfism—yet his cuteness facilitated his social climb. At the same time, his cuteness gave him positive media portrayal during his tours.

Between 1844 and 1847, Barnum and Thumb toured Europe, met by mobs of women who desired kisses from the freak.⁴⁵ Their receptions and social networking served to accrue a surplus of social capital, communicated to the American audiences they would return to in 1847 through newspaper coverage and souvenirs. One such souvenir, a pamphlet published in New York upon General Thumb’s 1847 return to the United States, compiled these Europeans’ adoration for Thumb. In effect, it allayed attention and reinforced his high-class status as

⁴⁵ Hawkins. “The Real Tom Thumb and the Birth of Celebrity.” *BBC News* (online). November 25, 2014.

approved by European aristocracy, promoting his class construction to American audiences.

— *Artifact of the Audience* —

“The celebrated General Tom Thumb paid the town a visit last summer. His presence was hailed with enthusiastic delight, and people crowded from the most remote settlements to gaze upon the tiny man. One poor Irishwoman insisted ‘that he was not a human crathur [sic], but a fairy changeling, and that he would vanish away some day, and never be heard of again.’ ”

— *Susanna Moodie, in her 1853 travel memoirs.*⁴⁶

Despite the Irishwoman’s claims above, and despite General Tom Thumb’s travels to and from farm towns with the circus, American communities continued to share their speculations on this little man’s big reputation. The souvenir pamphlet I discuss in this section is one such example of a circulating narrative, but embodied in a physical packaging and intended to promote Thumb’s celebrity persona. These objects, of course, are more than mere things. Rather, they are shorthand for events, stand-ins for people, vehicles for the sort of collective storytelling by which we convey histories. It is in the poignancy of recalling experiences through what material items have survived history—making it into archives—that prompts me to search museums’ catalogs for glimpses into the physical objects that preoccupied space in people’s lives and conversations.

During my first visit to Special Collections in the Swem Library at The College of William & Mary during the sleepy and humid summer of 2014, I encountered an object that mesmerized me for its intent on commemorating a person—an 1847 pamphlet, likely sold as a souvenir at a freakshow or in oddities museum. This 24-page, 4x11” pamphlet about the dwarf freakshow performer Charles S. Stratton, “better known by his stage name General Tom Thumb,” contains:

- a physiological exploration of Stratton’s anatomy;
- a contextualization situating his life as embedded in a celebrated Western folklore of other fictional dwarves, such as the Lilliputians in *Gulliver’s Travels*;

⁴⁶ Susanna (Strickland) Moodie. *Life in the Clearings Versus the Bush*. (London, England: R. Bentley, 1853): 97-98.

- a collection of newspaper accounts of Thumb's reception in Europe by aristocrats, including Queen Victoria of England, from his 1844-1847 tour across the continent; and,
- a 'songbook' containing lyrics and poems that Thumb performed, as well as ones written to honor Thumb in his time abroad.⁴⁷

By positioning General Tom Thumb among these prominent and classed figures, as well as pulling his name from the English folk tale, the text elevates him to legendary status.

Furthermore, it distinguishes Thumb from the aforementioned compatriots, noting:

“Many of these tiny gentlemen have been much or partially deformed, and so pain has been felt whilst looking at them. But in the case of the hero of our narrative no drawback exists, even to the approach of a defect. All former dwarfs were, in shape as in size, far his inferiors.”⁴⁸

Not only does the writer assert that there exist ranges of human experience that naturally center around the normate body, but they also argue that extraordinary bodies have unquestionably differing forms of social acceptability based on their ability—whether it is range of movement, proportionality of limbs, acknowledgement of chronic pain, and other characteristics. This stems from a faux-empathetic, ableist sense of connection to the deviant body: the idea that any ability distinct from the normate's that is viewed as lack or deficiency therefore diminishes the value of that body. One costume Thumb donned was a tight bodysuit which, with the proper poses, likened him to a Greek statue of an ideal man for the audience. That Stratton's body remains relatively free from grotesque ogling and that he becomes viewed as the “perfect” freak for his ability to perform everyday function elevates him to an American celebrity.

Americans consumed Thumb's celebrity outside his performances by passing around souvenir items like this pamphlet—and so, these items have social histories of their own. In

⁴⁷ *Sketch of the Life, Personal Appearance, Character and Manners of Charles S. Stratton, the Man in Miniature, Known As General Tom Thumb, and His Wife, Lavinia Warren Stratton: Including the History of Their Courtship and Marriage: With Some Account of Remarkable Dwarfs, Giants, and Other Human Phenomena of Ancient and Modern Times: Also, Songs Given At Their Public Levees.* (New York: Van Norden & Amerman, Printers, 1847)

⁴⁸ Ibid: 4.

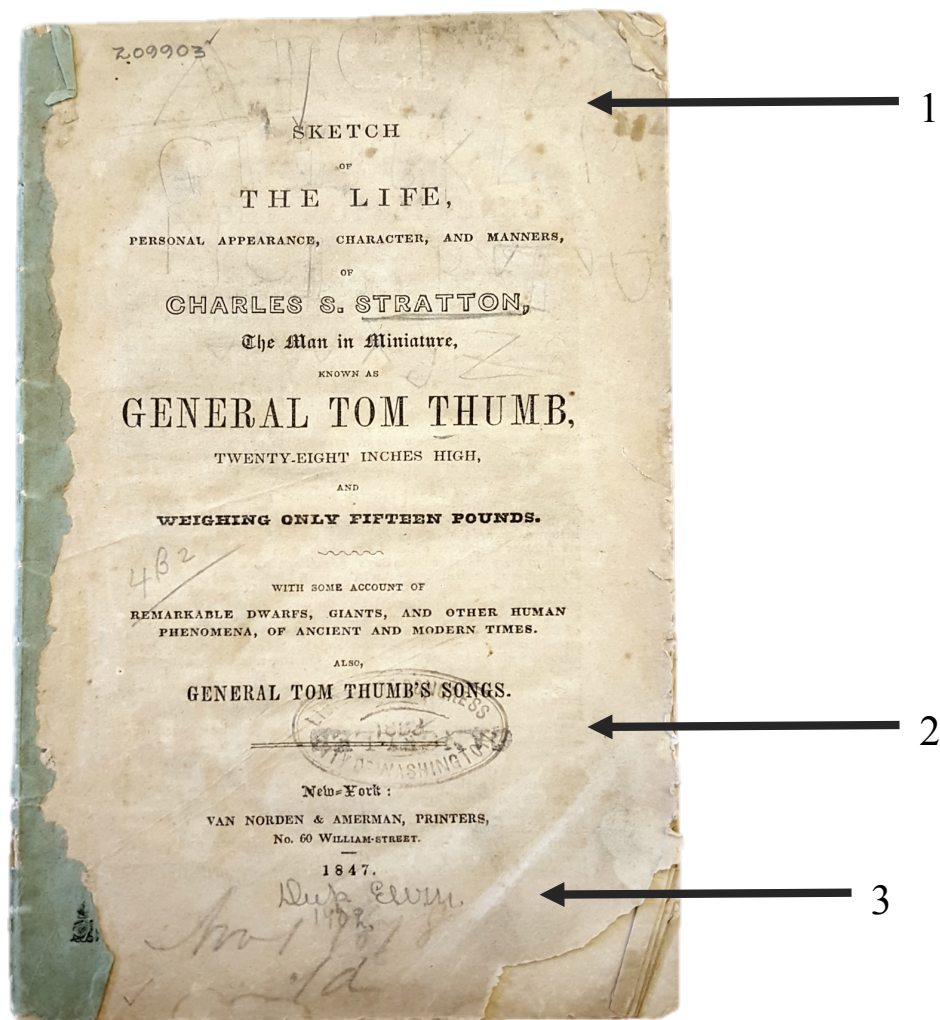
examining the pamphlet, I pored over every mark as evidence of how this item circulated and who consumed its words. The pamphlet's thin, yellowed pages have become fragile with age, as they were probably not intended to survive for decades after their production. A green strip of paper binding protects the inches of string that hold the leaves of paper together—but it has frayed over time, leaving a faded mint green spine that forms peaks and valleys where the paper has flaked away. The scaly binding reveals a deeper, creamier yellow color where the paper was once shielded from the fade of light by the force that marries these pages together into a story.

We can even observe that this yellow area of richness, a glimpse into a more vividly colored past, is irregular as well. The forces that eroded the document's binding have progressed over time to fade some areas before more pieces of the binding broke away. Perhaps because of many hands touching the document, or its travels between archives, the effects of time and weather have created visible effects on this document—and we learn this from seeing their effects. What collectors may consider blemishes may be the only evidence we have of people encountering the archival object, itself a part of history apart from the history that the pamphlet itself contains. I held this document, feeling haunted by these traces and wondering whose spectral figures I was encountering secondhand.

At four inches wide and eleven inches tall, it appears to be an ephemeral object—meant to be consumed, read, and then probably disposed of because of its fragile construction and cheap production. Someone practiced writing their alphabet on the cover in pencil in unsteady, block-like letters, suggesting that they were practicing their literacy skills at the time. One must infer that this pamphlet and others like it took on lives other than for their intended reading—they became scraps to use for their owners' purposes. But how does this pamphlet interact with, mitigate, and contradict its readers' understandings of body, normalcy, and American-ness?

This document would have been sold after Thumb's return to the United States, and is intended to act both as educational material as well as an advertisement that prompts further curiosity about life with a deviant body. Because no picture of Thumb's diminutive form is included, the pamphlet may encourage readers who did not experience the freak show to see it and judge his performance for themselves—while simultaneously promoting a narrative that situates a circus freak as a gentleman welcomed by and associated with European aristocracy.

This is, in effect, a way to structure the narrative around this extraordinary man's deviant body to convey a specific identity: a comparatively 'noble' figure of elevated social repute and tastes.



Although the settler-state of the US differs from Europe, European cities and cultures were held in parity as the comparative measure of American growth and success. The pamphlet's composition of testimonies from foreign newspapers on Thumb's body plays into a form of literary and intellectual commerce in which European journalists perform the role of mediating American cultural discourses of class, power, nation, and identity. By including European praise for Thumb, the pamphlet's writers situate him as fitting among a league of nobility—this nobility transmutes across the Atlantic in the United States to class.

The presence and popularity of US entertainers reflects a contentious pluralistic politics in a form of cross-cultural exchange while promoting an internationalizing standard of cultural commodity consumption. As the center of American intellectual, industrial, and commercial activity, the metropolis of New York revolutionized journalism through mass production and consumption. The reach of this document is unknown, but its context reveals the audience that received it—namely, what the writers thought would constitute as news, as well as what they thought would convince the audience to attend the freak show.⁴⁹

Although testimonies of General Tom Thumb's travels and socializing create a narrative on how readers understand the life of a person with a disability, the document itself and its own travels suggest the context of its social reception.

Arrow 1 points to an alphabet written on the pamphlet's cover; this suggests that this booklet was seen as a resource apart from the ideas it contained, perhaps for someone with few resources. The shaky lines of the letters and the blocky style suggest that the hand that held the pencil was searching to refine their expression via typographic styling. The attempt to erase this

⁴⁹ In the late process of writing this paper, I found four sister copies of this pamphlet, revised or expanded upon and published at later dates. This copy, however, is the earliest one that I found—and the only copy of it that I could find in the archives I scoured. I considered writing about how the narrative around Thumb's life changed throughout these five pamphlets, but that would be too much for this project.

alphabet, as well, indicates some decision to remove this expression—perhaps to preserve the document, perhaps because the exercise was done. Arrow 2 intimates a stamp from the Library of Congress, dated 1883. We can understand that this document was assimilated into a repertoire of cultural import, seen as worth keeping and sharing with the public. Arrow 3 indicates a third marking, “Joe Elvin, 1902,” possibly a later owner. And now, this artifact lives in the Rare Books catacombs of Swem Library in Williamsburg, Virginia, sheltered from public view unless someone with the privilege of research credentials may request to sit down with the material inside a temperature- and climate-controlled reading room, under the watchful eye of a librarian, in an environment ostensibly unimaginable to the pamphlet’s subject and audience. Why and how has this document traveled through so many hands and contexts? Catalog records indicate that *Sketch of the Life* was part of Swem’s inventory before archivists began to digitize the library’s catalogs in 1989. With this archival silence, the mysteries of this item in the archive offer us some ghostly indications of how people related to this object as an interface with their environments and the past—as a piece of writing material, as literature, as a collectible.

Shortly after Stratton’s 1882 retirement, the pamphlet was marked with a Library of Congress stamp in 1883, indicating that this artifact made its way to the collections of the largest United States document archive. Clearly, someone relished this booklet as an important historical object. Despite that, the stamp was cancelled and the pamphlet left the library; the only later indication of its ownership on the cover is a name: “Dick Elvin, 1902.” Without knowing how Earl Gregg Swem Library acquired this document, it is unclear how the article has travelled through time and who has understood its words as a textually embodied freak on display.

In “The Power of the Story,” Michel-Rolph Trouillot asserts that there is a divide between history which is ‘said to have happened’ and history as it actually happened, and that

this divide is a result of how history is narrated.⁵⁰ The spectacular stories of the noble dwarf, the exotic Pygmy, the bearded lady, and the taxidermied animal carcass masquerading as mermaid—all of these create an economy of *humbug*: the narratives around these objects and the public's dispute over the truthfulness of these bodies on display. Indeed, Trouillot affirms the brilliance of creating controversy over the disputes on whether these freaks and oddities were natural or a sham, pointing to the appeal of verifying for oneself the legitimacy of freakery by means of promoting controversy and ambiguity over an exhibition's origins:

“...at some stage, for reasons that are themselves historical, most often spurred by controversy, collectivities experience the need to impose a test of credibility on certain events and narratives because it matters to them whether these events are true or false, whether these stories are fact or fiction.”⁵¹

But what is not talked about? Trouillot, in his chapter, questions the silences between these recorded controversies. In dis/ability studies, the lens through which I examine these histories, the obscuring of disability in history occurs most often in archival silences. In William & Mary's library database, this pamphlet was never marked as relating to disability, despite the recognition and profit from the pronounced bodily deviance of dwarfism, recognized as a disability in American culture. Without reading for the presence of disability rather than the particular embodiment of dwarfism or the search term of someone's name alone, how would other dis/ability studies scholars find the presence of disability in history? Lauren Klein, in “The Image of Absence,” asks people in digital humanities and library sciences to consider the

“ ‘transformation’ of the archive, characterized not only by the proliferation of paths through [digital] content that are facilitated by the digital archive's underlying database structure, the issue of archival silence—or gaps in the archival record—remains difficult to address. ”

⁵⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot. “The Power in the Story.” In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1995): 1-30.

⁵¹ Ibid, 8.

Below is a screenshot of William & Mary's catalog entry for this document:⁵²

Filter options

Sketch of the life, personal appearance, character, and manners, of Charles S. Stratton, the man in miniature, known as General Tom Thumb ... with some account of remarkable dwarfs, giants, and other human phenomena, of ancient and modern times. Also, General Tom Thumb's songs. [Permalink](#)

New-York, Van Norden & Amerman, printers, 1847. 1847

● Available at Swem Library Rare Books (GN69.5 .S9 S5)

Details **Virtual Shelf** **Special Collections Request**

Actions ▾

Title: Sketch of the life, personal appearance, character, and manners, of Charles S. Stratton, the man in miniature, known as General Tom Thumb ... with some account of remarkable dwarfs, giants, and other human phenomena, of ancient and modern times. Also, General Tom Thumb's songs.

Subjects: Thumb, Tom, 1838-1883; Dwarfs -- Biography

Description: Sabin 92735.

Publisher: New-York, Van Norden & Amerman, printers, 1847.

Creation Date: 1847

Format: 24 p. 19 cm..

Language: English

Source: 01COWM WM ALMA

Alma MMS ID: 991007886019703196

The subject tags, highlighted in the screenshot, only note “Thumb, Tom, 1838-1883” and “Dwarfs – Biography.” Because this item is not tagged under the search subjects of disability, freak shows, celebrity, circus work, theater, P.T. Barnum, or any other associated domain, the digital silence in the archive furthers the marginalization of the disabled identity—if scholars cannot find these resources, then they are not being used to create complete narratives depicting disability history. To incorporate more primary sources in disability histories such as this—and to see the connections people made in the past—we must look toward archival silences that only slow these narratives’ circulations today.

⁵² Catalog entry for *Sketch of the Life*. Permalink [here](#).

We search, in history, for what survives—but the organization and connectivity of what little we have to examine our past when it comes to disability—and our ability to turn these objects into narratives has been hampered by the silence of the archive. Despite the silences in this object’s archive and the mysteries of its journey to my hands, I am working to include this history in a disability narrative by using it for my honors thesis. While it is a symbol of what is obscured and marginalized, its recovery is also symbolic of a resurrection, an interface between present and past. I call upon researchers who comb through quiet archives to update these catalogs, and for librarians and archivists incorporating these entries into their systems to search for the discourse of disability (among other marginalized identities) in its formation. In this, we may better serve the academics and the citizen scholars ahead of us—digitally passing along this pamphlet much like its owners did, but with a global audience much wider than Thumb could have ever imagined. By increasing access to objects like this, we enable historians to closely examine the obscured and well-traveled documents of the past, such as this pamphlet.

— *The Economic Freak & Class Mobility* —

“At last THEY CAME.

Preceding them was the self-possessed, the self-poised, the shrewd-eyed, kindly-faced BARNUM -- BARNUM, the Prince of Showmen, the manager of the affair, which is, in his own word, "the biggest little thing that was ever known." An instantaneous uprising ensued; *all looked, few saw*; many stood upon the seats, others stood upon stools placed on the seats; by many good breeding was forgotten, by very many the sanctity of the occasion and the sacredness of the ceremonies were entirely ignored. As the little party toddled up the aisle a sense of the ludicrous seemed to hit many a bump of fun and irrepressible and unpleasantly audible giggle ran through the church.”⁵³

— *The New York Times*

The 1847 *Life of Charles Stratton* booklet in Swem Library’s archive describes General Tom Thumb’s ability, intellect, size, and personality, taking time to explain how he performs “everyday” activities that persons of average height easily complete, as the human world has been designed for the normative size. Because Stratton became wealthy as a performer, he could afford custom-made clothes, homes, and even a pony-drawn carriage to fulfill the classed position Barnum had created for him, as well as for his own comfort in a world made by and for much larger bodies.⁵⁴

The freak show, in the American context, reinforces bodily normality through stage presentation and performance. Tom Thumb’s expensive military costumes, adorned with ribbons and medals, acted as contrasts to his small body, which was unacceptable for wartime service—despite this, it ranked him as leader among the freaks. He became Emperor Napoleon, the Revolutionary soldier, the Scottish warrior.

By performing with a “straight man” and illustrating his respectability through his pursuit of a conventionally miniature middle-class life, Thumb appealed to middle- and lower-class viewers’ curiosity, appeasing their fears on pressing issues of poverty, immigration, and the rise of industrial capitalism.⁵⁵ His success may be traced not so much to a professed message that any

⁵³ “THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁵⁴ Sketch of the Life: 3.

⁵⁵ Hildegard Hoeller. "Freaks and the American Dream: Horatio Alger, P. T. Barnum, and the Art of Humbug." *Studies in American Fiction* 34, no. 2 (2006): 199.

little person may climb to respectability or that any little person may embody the American dream with determination and luck. Rather, this message implies almost the direct opposite—that Stratton, as a freak who rose from rags to riches, is newsworthy, especially for someone whose body deviates from the norm.

Barnum's exaggeration of Tom Thumb as a little man of great gentlemanliness plays with conventions of the freak show business to manipulate literal, corporeal size and transform personas. While Stratton's dwarfism sets him apart from the normate, his presentation in performance highlights that freaks were packaged, dressed, practiced, and paraded in front of audiences; this mastery of space and behavior was the crucial element in determining their success as a freak.⁵⁶ Thumb's appeal lay particularly in his witty repartée, self-parody, and awareness of the ludicrousness of the contrast between his body and the roles he played.

This jockeying served several purposes: it prevented audiences from resenting or exposing the performance as an inaccurate depiction of Stratton's life; it alleviated any discomfort audiences felt when viewing a disabled person as a curiosity; and it helped the aggrandized presentation by putting the exhibited person, by means of humor and intelligence, on the same level as the audience.

Charles Stratton's performances allowed customers, as well as the pamphlet's readers, to laugh away the presence of his own difference. Thumb was an exhibitionist for a type of voyeurism that arose from appalling living conditions of massive numbers of immigrants becoming more and more visible, easing tensions onlookers had about their own curiosity about the disabled. Consumers could enjoy his presence without undue consideration for the actual plight of the urban poor and disabled—the actual lives and circumstances of those exhibited were

⁵⁶ Thomson. *Extraordinary Bodies*: 38.

replaced, as in Stratton's case, with purposeful distortions designed to market the exhibits and produce a more appealing freak for mass consumption.

Nowhere is the disabled figure more troubling to the American ideology and history that in relation to the concept of work: the system of production and distribution of economic resources in which the abstract principles of self-government, self-determination, autonomy, and progress are manifested. Labor transforms necessity into virtue and equates productive work with moral worth, and inability to work in the context of society with idleness and depravity. Thus, labor as the definitive creed of the Puritan is American legacy. Thumb, as a figure of the self-made man, holds cultural authority, especially in the 19th century.

Charles Stratton exemplifies the economic freak that who people could not avoid seeing, particularly where living conditions in a rapidly industrializing America as well as increasing violence to the American body and American bodies by the Civil War made deviant bodies increasingly visible.⁵⁷ In this way, the freak show promotes a form of American "cultural literacy" according to Philip McGowan, by which the project of American self-making depends on displayed throngs of otherness—in General Tom Thumb's case, an extraordinary and unforeseen transformation of class in a group of people otherwise restricted financially and socially by their bodies.⁵⁸

Chris Rojek outlines a dual theory of celebrity: as ascribed or achieved.⁵⁹ Ascribed celebrity derives from lineage; achieved celebrity forms through personal feats. Many scholars sell the idea of celebrity-as-commodity, in which capitalism leverages power to those celebrities via a sort of idol worship that prompts people to consume celebrity-endorsed ideas and products.

⁵⁷ Bogdan, *Freak Show*: 31-33.

⁵⁸ Philip McGowan. *American Carnival: Seeing and Reading American Culture*. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2001): 27.

⁵⁹ Chris Rojek. *Celebrity*. (London, United Kingdom: Reaktion Books, 2001)

Through the enjoinder of personal identity and public persona, the celebrity individual becomes a commodity with their own use and exchange value. Rojek also posits that celebrities, through the mystification of commodity fetishization, substitute for religious and political leaders and have cultural capital. Through their hypervisibility, they are simultaneously product of consumer culture and commodity culture's "biggest boosters."⁶⁰

Rather than advertising specific products, General Tom Thumb instead embodied the transgression of social expectations for the deviant and disabled. At Thumb's celebrity wedding reception in New York City, attended by ten thousand, the *New York Times* reported that businesspeople took "every opportunity to obtain a little gratuitous advertising, [rushing] frantically to the presentation line" of wedding gifts for the couple to open—which were painstakingly noted, listed, and even illustrated by newspapers.⁶¹ Publishers of the 1847 "Life of Charles Stratton" pamphlet, which I explored earlier, developed a sister pamphlet for the wedding, which contained an illustrated itinerary of various items:

- "A basket of choice fruit presented to Mrs. Gen. Tom Thumb, by James S. Parmelee;
- General Tom Thumb's Bridal cake, manufactured by Barmore, 700 Broadway;
- Furs from Gunther's Plate, the gift of Mrs. James Gordon Bennett, Mrs. Livingston, &c.;
- Magnificent and costly diamond-studded watch and chatelaine, presented by Messrs. Ball & Black; and
- Exquisite mechanical bird and box, presented by P.T. Barnum."⁶²

The *New York Times* cover story article exhibits an even broader array of contributions, demarcating in all-caps the benefactors' names and the businesses' names for each present. In this way, Thumb's celebrity persona served as a vehicle for businesses' profit interests—an early formation of what would later become celebrity endorsements.

⁶⁰ Chris Rojek. Quoted in *Stargazing: Celebrity, Fame, and Social Interaction*, ed. Kerry O. Ferris and Scott R. Harris. (New York: Routledge, 2011): 6.

⁶¹ "THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS." *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁶² Sketch of the Life, Personal Appearance, Character, and Manners of Charles S. Stratton, the Man in Miniature, Known as General Tom Thumb, and his Wife, Lavinia Warren Stratton; Including the History of their Courtship and Marriage, with Some Account of Remarkable Dwarfs, Giants, & Other Human Phenomena, of Ancient and Modern Times, and Songs Given at their Public Levees. New York: Press of Wynkoop & Hallenbeck, 1863.

According to Rene Girard, the celebrity invites others to imitate them and desire their lifestyle, a class construction demarcated by commodity consumption.⁶³ General Tom Thumb's custom-built suits, canes, carriages, homes, and more communicate his class position to the uninformed, long before Thorstein Veblen developed the term *conspicuous consumption*. Upon his wedding, business owners exploited the spectacle of the Tom Thumb wedding to promote their own products through what I term a sort of *conspicuous benefaction*—fostering goodwill for their brands through gift-giving as well as taking advantage of publicity to advertise their wares as for the upper classes.

To these business owners, celebrity meant opportunity to profit from the classed spectacle as opposed to the popular freak show. But what did celebrity *mean* to Americans of the era? How can we account for the lived experiences of celebrity culture? By examining how Americans mentioned Thumb, we begin to disentangle the pleasures of the celebrity spectacle.

Many Americans spoke of General Tom Thumb as a way to compare things grand and interesting. One book reviewer in the *American Whig Review* claims the piece *Festus* is only “nearly as marvelous” as General Tom Thumb, claiming it, “like other monsters ... is altogether original.”⁶⁴ This ambiguous use of ‘monster’ is nonetheless puzzling. Other publications incorporated General Tom Thumb to educate. An 1848 encyclopedia entry for “Prodigies” mentions Thumb as an example of human difference among hairy women, Chinese foot-binding, and double-headed children; it also prodding the reader to check out the entry for “Curiosities of Human Nature.”⁶⁵ This situates him as firmly abnormal and among a legion of deviant bodies. At the same time, an 1849 children's book describes the life and travel of General Tom Thumb,

⁶³ Gabriel Andrade. “Girard, René,” in the *International Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (online). 2017.

⁶⁴ “Festus.” In *The American Whig Review: A Whig Journal of Politics, Literature, Art and Science*. Vol 5. (New York: George H Colton, 118 Nassau Street: 1847): 45.

⁶⁵ Samuel Griswold Goodrich. “Prodigies.” In *Parley's Cabinet Library: For Schools and Families: The World and Its Inhabitants*. Volume 20. (Boston, Massachusetts: George C. Rand & Co., 1848): 220-21.

noting that “Other little people have since spring into notice—but Thomas continues to keep the public eye, in spite of all competitors.”⁶⁶ Appealing to children’s curiosity and affinity for the fantastical, this book retells with illustrations Thumb’s encounters with European nobility—women clamoring for kisses, the battle with Queen Victoria’s dog, and more amusing anecdotes that situate his life as extraordinary.

Other Americans figured Thumb’s celebrity as a rhetorical device with which they commented on American politics. In an 1847 article published in *The Boston Courier*, Joseph Buckingham bemoans hero worship as merely patriotic sentiment valorizing military figures as celebrating violence. He asserts that General Zachary Taylor, who would become president of the United States in 1849, was not nearly “half as celebrated as ‘General Tom Thumb,’ ” but the press made him an idol following his successes in the Mexican-American War.⁶⁷ Buckingham appears to understand the cultural project of reification in critiquing the valorization of war in his argument for pacifism.

Representative Gilbert Dean (Whig-NY) also used Thumb’s name to criticize the Democratic Party’s leadership in 1852, claiming that they cared not for the generals who served in the Mexican-American War. Rather, Rep. Dean posited that their opposition to the war equaled a lack of respect for the soldiers who served—equating generals’ worth with that of their coat buttons, or even General Tom Thumb.⁶⁸ Dean mocked Thumb as benefiting from a false military title, throwing shade at the opposing party’s pacifism by portraying their respect for the military as equal to that of a button or a faux-general. That General Tom Thumb’s name was

⁶⁶ Life and Travels of Thomas Thumb, in the United States, England, France, and Belgium. With Illustrations of Him in his Different Costumes. Gale, Cengage Learning. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lindsay and Blackington, c1849): 4.

⁶⁷ Joseph T Buckingham. *Personal Memoirs and Recollections of Editorial Life*. Vol 2. (Boston, Massachusetts: Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852): 130-135.

⁶⁸ Dean, Gilbert. Speech of Hon. Gilbert Dean, of New York, on the Position of New York on the Presidency, Delivered in the House of Representatives, April 23, 1852. (Washington, DC: Congressional Globe Office, 1852): 5.

used in Congress points to its importance in American discourse—not only about freak bodies, but also military and political bodies in using Thumb to promote a presidential candidate for the 1852 election.

Henry Spicer, a British man, recalled seeing audiences flocking to see Thumb while he performed in London, critiquing Thumb as a “miserable little object,” “wretched little child-ape.”

⁶⁹ To him, these exhibitions were “manhood in its most degraded form,” attracting audience attention and speculation to a crude body rather than to the “grand progressive march of philosophy” as a body of knowledge. Spicer refuted the freak show as fare for the uninformed that keeps them worshipping the strange rather than learning.

This last, severe critique points to how audiences perceived circus freaks who were not as perfect, cute, and classed as General Tom Thumb. Americans—and Europeans—saw him primarily as an important cultural figure rather than a portent or public disturbance, and their conceptions of Thumb extended beyond the sphere of the freak show alone. Spicer’s critique, however, bemoans the space Thumb’s body occupies in popular attention. Despite Thumb’s classed construction and wealth, Spicer sees the spectacle around Thumb as a grotesque emblem of social regression. Not only is Thumb an aberration, but he also negatively impacts popular society and the aristocratic elite alike by occupying their time.

Thumb’s celebrity was not singular in receiving praise; rather, Thumb’s name and persona became vehicles for people to argue their worldviews. His celebrity entailed a multiplicity of meanings among different Americans. What is important to note, however, is that these incorporations of his brand occupied a shared cultural vocabulary—he was a key word in American culture during his career and especially at the height of his fame, in his wedding.

⁶⁹ Henry Spicer. *Sights and Sounds: The Mystery of the Day: Comprising an Entire history of the American “Spirit” Manifestations*. Gale, Cengage Learning. (London, England: Thomas Bosworth, 215 Regent Street, 1853), 8-9.

— *Panning Out: More Unions of Freakery, Disability, and Identity* —

“The Scriptures tell us that a little matter kindleth a great flame, and that being the case, no one need be surprised that two little matters should create such a tremendous hullabaloo, such a furore of excitement, such an intensity of interest in the feminine world of New-York and its neighborhood, as have the loves of our Lilliputians. We say “feminine world,” because there were more than twenty thousand women in this City yesterday morning up and dressed an hour and a half before their usual time, solely and simply because of the approaching nuptials of Mr. STRATTON and Miss WARREN. They didn’t all have cards of admission, oh no, but it wasn’t their fault. Fathers were flattered, husbands were hectored, brothers were bullied and cousins were cozened into buying, begging, borrowing, in some way or other getting tickets of admission to the grand affair.”⁷⁰

— *The New York Times*

How did General Tom Thumb’s success stand apart from that of other freaks and sideshow performers? I assert that after the Civil War, the increase in deviant bodies as gruesome casualties of warfare and beggars in poverty across the Reconstruction South stigmatized the deviant body further, encouraging people to petition cities for increased policing and ordinances against bodily abnormality as a public nuisance.

During the 1800s, many people with disabilities were institutionalized and discriminated against, seen as ‘unfit’ for public participation in the economy—even in the role of the lowliest street beggar. The earliest ‘ugly law’ was written as a city ordinance in San Francisco in 1867, only two years after the end of the Civil War and four years after Stratton’s celebrity wedding.⁷¹ In the city’s words, people who were “diseased, maimed, mutilated, or in any way deformed” were identified as unsightly beggars, and were unfit for the public domain.⁷² In the years following, cities around the United States wrote and passed similar legislation to define unsightly subjects and disability after the greater visibility and number of disabled people, widowed families, and elderly without care as a consequence of the war.⁷³

⁷⁰ “THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁷¹ Susan M. Schweik *The Ugly Laws: Disability in Public*. (New York: New York University, 2009): 2-3.

⁷² *Ibid*: 2-3.

⁷³ *Ibid*: 2-3. Schweik writes that these laws were “probably more the norm than the exception,” pointing to a dozen other cities that continued to legislate and enforce these codes, especially in the 1880s and as late as 1913. One officer tried to use an ugly law to arrest a homeless man in the 1970s; a judge threw out the case because of the impossibility of proving someone ugly for the prosecution—rather than objecting to the policing of people’s right to be out in public.

This is a cost of war absorbed into the cost of public health and social services that was addressed via sequestration of deviance. This shows that the ties of community policing of vagrants and questions of American citizenship, the role of charity in an economic system, and homelessness and disability as byproducts of capitalism post-Industrial Revolution. Diagnosis of a social malaise, legal codification, enactment, crackdown, and reform: all were the response of American law and roles to deviant bodies. What an impossible and infuriating task it must have been—and still is, in contemporary police work—to pursue removing the ‘unsightly’ loiterers, beggars, and migrants.⁷⁴ The Ugly Laws emphasize a specific cultural determinant; they position the disabled body as a threat to American individualism, presenting begging and poverty as individual problems rather than a consequence of broader social inequalities.

At the same time that Ugly Laws outlawed the physically and visibly disabled, the freak show commercialized and presented the disabled as oddities for amusement and profit.⁷⁵ The freak show, as the most popular form of entertainment and a method of ‘scientific’ education, comes to represent a space—both an economy and a performance—in which transgressing social divisions serves to further delineate the differences of the performers and the audience members.

The opportunities for disabled people to work were slim, and freak shows were lucrative operations. The freak show provided opportunity and a social space for its workers—some of whom were ‘geeks’ who had learned tricks such as fire-breathing, sword-swallowing, and the gymnastic arts; some of whom were ‘self-made’ freaks by virtue of tattoo art, obesity, or feats of strength. People with extraordinary bodies were often discovered and hired at young ages—including Charles Stratton, contracted to Phineas Barnum under his mother’s supervision. How

⁷⁴ Between the mid-1990s and 2010, my home town of Atlanta demolished nearly all of its public housing. Unsurprisingly, homelessness and renters’ abuses by landlords are major problems facing a city that is also one of the most rapidly gentrifying in the US.

⁷⁵ Schweik, *The Ugly Laws*: 2-3.

did the freak narratives and performances matter, when considering entanglements of identity? Charles Stratton was engineered to succeed in his class mobility through his white privilege. His dwarfism, while considered deviant, negated the threat of his disability compared to how other disabled persons' embodiments were viewed. While their bodies were prodded, ostracized, exoticized, and seen as sexually aggressive, his size and lack of deformation, sickliness, or melancholy gave him an escape from social pity and instead prompted scientists to declare him "so many, so hearty, and so happy."⁷⁶ His lack of ugliness and social grooming rendered him different from the menagerie of freaks that scientists interrogated with their tools, rules, and views. I bring up the experiences of other freak show workers below to contrast and further illustrate how exceptional General Tom Thumb's experiences were as a disabled American—and how far he deviates from what was normal even in his own industry.

To take advantage of one's freakishness for the maximum profit encouraged the exaggeration of one's differences to better 'perform' the role. Joice Heth, a former slave who Barnum hired from another showman for a hefty \$1,000, was 'improved upon' in her role as the supposed, surviving 160-year-old nursemaid of President George Washington by the removal of her remaining teeth.⁷⁷ Comparatively, Stratton's backstory was also changed—his birthplace became London, his name to General Tom Thumb, and his age from five to eleven; this does not compare to the dental torture of a woman so that she simply appeared older.⁷⁸ The claim that Joice Heth, however, was old enough to have nursed the infant Washington uniquely posits her as a sort of "national mother" figure, recognizing slavery as essential to the American founding narrative.

⁷⁶ Sketch of the Life, 1847: 4.

⁷⁷ Thomson. *Extraordinary Bodies*: 59-61.

⁷⁸ Bogdan, *Freak Show*: 149.

Heth's life and humbug backstory signify the alienation and degradation of colonization, the expropriation of female labor, and the intersecting sexual and economic exploitation of black women by men. But the old woman had limited choices. Her age, blindness, and disability in her limbs limited her ability to work in service—the most available work for free African-American women—occluding her potential to find work. Associating a slave woman as a sort of mother figure to the U.S.'s first president, coupled with the claim that Heth was around 160, operated in the advertising sphere of *humbug*.

P.T. Barnum, the man who molded Charles Stratton into General Tom Thumb, published a book in between his two autobiographies about humbuggery's social value. In the introduction, he shares a story about a magician who travels across America.⁷⁹ On the first day in a new town, the magician performs his repertoire of tricks—and at his show's conclusion, he promising to reveal these tricks' secrets to his audience of speculators on the following day for an even larger performance fee. True to his promise, he deconstructs his show, making a large sum of money. Barnum notes that this man's trade “spoiled the legerdemain market on that particular route, for several years.”⁸⁰ The public's obsession with the controversy reflects the questioning of many social bonds, including race relations, womanhood, bodily deviance, and cost of living. To Barnum, these controversies and elaborate constructions created opportunities rather than deceit. He continues:

So, if we could have a full exposure of “the tricks of the trade” of all sorts, of humbugs and deceivers of past times, religious, political, financial, scientific, quackish and so forth, we might perhaps look for a somewhat wise generation to follow us. I shall be well satisfied if I can do something towards so good a purpose.⁸¹

⁷⁹ Barnum, Phineas Taylor. *The Humbugs of the World: An Account of Humbugs, Delusions, Impositions, Quackeries, Deceits and Deceivers Generally in all Ages*. (London, United Kingdom: J.C. Hotten, 1866)

⁸⁰ *Ibid*: v.

⁸¹ *Ibid*: v.

As a site of interpretation, General Tom Thumb's body served as a mean to ideological and practical ends: making money and the mediation of a story by the American audience. As it were, the profit in *humbug* lay in the attractiveness of controversy and the incentive for the everyman to decide a story's validity with their own eyes and ideas. The charade of Thumb's celebrity falls into Barnum's humbug economics—which Americans recognized. In effect, Barnum recognized humbug as a tool to deconstruct social norms and values that divided society and reinforced power imbalances. Nonetheless, the spectacle reigned supreme.

Compared to Joice Heth and others involved in humbug economies of cultural and monetary exchange, Charles and Lavinia Stratton were far more wealthy, famous, and celebrated—even after they stopped performing. The heights that they reached, with the wedding as their pinnacle, would be the loftiest for freaks in American history. After the medicalization and criminalization of deviance, the rise of the eugenics movement controlled the disabled and deviant. The extraordinary body's place in history thereafter would be warning signs of social disorder, and the unions of notoriety and commodification of the human body portrayed the disabled as burdens to productivity and therefore the health of the national body.

— *Conclusion: Another Famous Spectacle, A Different Time* —

“Now, the General -- by which we mean the happy bridegroom, Tom Thumb -- or CHARLES STRATTON, Esq., -- . . . if he knows anything, knows what's what in a crowd. *He -- if any one -- can endure* the flashing artillery of ten thousand eyes -- the running fire of ten thousand comments -- the bombardment with admiring exclamations, which the hero of such a scene must endure. He, therefore, looked, not unusually astonished -- nor remarkably surprised -- but as pleased and joyful, and smiling, and jolly as the happiest of happy bridegrooms might, when he finally reached the Metropolitan Hotel,

AFTER THE CEREMONY.”⁸²

— *The New York Times*

On June 1, 1933, the U.S. Senate Banking and Currency Committee summoned J.P. Morgan Jr. to appear before them and testify about what the committee considered suspect business practices. Three years after the stock market crash, newly-elected President Franklin Delano Roosevelt declared that he would pursue the “economic nobles” responsible for the deceitful loans, inside trading, and tax avoidance to create a more transparent financial system.⁸³ First-generation Italian immigrant Ferdinand Pecora, attorney serving as committee counsel, sought to prove that Morgan was trading stocks with his associates at prices below public market value.

The week of June 12, 1933, *Time* magazine featured Pecora on its cover, him coolly peering directly into the camera while he sits behind a desk, cigar in mouth and notes in hand.⁸⁴ Senator Carter Glass described this high-publicity investigation of the finance industrialists’ decisions that led to the Great Depression, in which bankers were surrounded by the heat of lights, microphones, and reporters, as a “circus, and the only things lacking now are peanuts and colored lemonade.”⁸⁵

⁸² “THE LOVING LILLIPUTIANS.” *The New York Times* (February 11, 1863).

⁸³ I can only find this saying attributed to him but cannot find any documents actually backing this up.

⁸⁴ “National Affairs: Wealth on Trial.” *TIME: The Weekly Newsmagazine*, June 13, 1933. 400,000 copies of this issue circulated that week.

⁸⁵ King, Gilbert. “The Man Who Busted the Banksters.” *Smithsonian.com*, November 29, 2011.

While J.P. Morgan Jr.'s testimony lacked the drama and showmanship of the circus, the paps popped him as the supporting figure in a show of their own—during a break, one newspaper reporter brought in a Ringling Brothers press agent Charles Leef and female circus dwarf Lya Graf, at that time the shortest woman in the world.

“Gangway!” The aisles cleared at Leef’s exhortion. “The smallest lady in the world wants to meet the richest man in the world!”^{86, 87}

Ron Chernow describes the exchange that took place between the two in *The House of Morgan*, a hybrid corporate history and biography of the Morgan family’s dynastic financial dealings that won the National Book Award. He writes:

Jack [Morgan Jr] apparently thought at first she was a child.
“I have a grandson bigger than you,” Jack said in the sudden glow of dozens of flashbulbs.
“But I’m older.”
“How old are you?”
“Thirty-two,” interjected Leef.
“I’m not!” Graf protested. “Only twenty.”
“Well, you certainly don’t look it,” Jack replied. “Where do you live?”
“In a tent, sir.”⁸⁸

The irony of this line, in the context of the shantytown ‘Hooverilles’ that populated many urban areas around the United States during the Depression. Chernow underscores the impact of this moment on a generation—not for any perception of disability, dwarfism, or freakery, but instead as the reformation of Morgan Jr.’s public perception. He writes: “For a generation of Americans, this would be their indelible image of Jack Morgan. The pictures were widely credited with starting a new age in financial public relations.”⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Qtd. in King, “The Man Who Busted the Banksters.”

⁸⁷ Photo from Associated Press, embedded, *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Ron Chernow. *The House of Morgan: An American Banking Dynasty and the Rise of Modern Finance.* (New York: Grove Press, 2010): 368.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 368.

John Brooks's 1969 retelling of this event in history publication *American Heritage* signals that the momentum of Morgan Jr.'s positive public perception from this haphazard meeting continued into the 1960s.⁹⁰

According to Brooks, Morgan became a figure of a "benign old dodderer" rather than a "grasping devil whose greed and ruthlessness had helped bring the nation to near ruin." How? To Brooks, J.P. Morgan Jr. took advantage of the change in public attitude by seizing upon the chance to "humanize" himself by this happenstance interaction with a freak. I believe that Morgan's intent may not have been to profit from this event, but his profit was certainly the result.

Lya Graf, however, did not profit.



After retiring from the circus two years following this meeting, she returned to her native Germany. In 1937, the German government deemed her a "useless person" and later shuttled her and her family to Auschwitz, where they were never heard from again.⁹¹ This photograph depicting the deviant body of a sideshow performer sitting on the lap of a man who epitomized corporate wealth and corruption captures the contrast between lifestyles of the rich and poor, of the abled and disabled in the early 20th Century. The differences between their sizes and implicit

⁹⁰ John Brooks. "The Millionaire and the Midget." *American Heritage*, October 1969.

⁹¹ Ibid.

power gestures toward the inequalities that defined Depression-era America. That Lya Graf was not a ‘social climber’ whose life was as celebrated as General Tom Thumb’s points toward what worked to enable Thumb’s fame and fortune, and what worked to disable and take her life.

This sad story is featured in Betty Adelson’s 2005 social history *The Lives of Dwarfs*. The book chronicles the lives of little people by exploring how they have been exploited, how they have coped with stigmatization, and how they have been repeatedly perceived as mythological creatures. At the same time that the United States’s national union came into question during the Civil War, General Tom Thumb’s celebrity and wedding reflect the enjoinder of his performative body and his disabled body—his celebrity persona and his self—in a sort of American union.

The aggrandizing means by which Charles Stratton was groomed, exaggerated, and given prestige as General Tom Thumb facilitated the growth of his wealth and fame such that he was the wealthiest and most widely renowned performer. By this means, his childhood performances and the aristocratic approval extended to a truer class mobility for the pair. The melding of person and role made the duo stars rather than freaks—establishing the basis for their glamour and grandeur. Both on and off the stage, the pair acted a gentleman and lady of status to be celebrated, rather than a phenomenon to be interrogated by physicians and scientists.

This differential treatment, even among freaks, reveals how the paradoxes of popular culture belie the constant and tensional mitigation of identity, questioning union and division in society. For freaks with humbug stories, those interrogations were the source of profit, prompting individuals to see-it-and-believe-it (or refute it) for themselves. For some, however, the contention was not in determining if one had been “had;” rather, the contention lay in the sacrilegious entanglements of morality, class, and hoodwinking.

Despite the exuberant tone of newspaper coverage, some onlookers questioned Barnum's motives. "When Mr. Barnum brings the church and its solemn rites into his show business, he outrages public decency," expressed *The Brooklyn Eagle*.⁹² "We are surprised that the clergy, or representatives of so respectable a body as the Episcopal Church should, for a moment, allow themselves to be used by this Yankee showman to advertise his business." This article from the *Brooklyn Eagle* newspaper was more critical than other coverage, however—chastising Barnum and the Episcopal clergy for allowing the crass commercialism of the heavily promoted wedding to profane a "house of God." To Christians who ascribed to strict moral codes eschewing consumer culture, the celebrity wedding was the exploitation of a sacred ritual for profit.

In this Protestant view of morality, money, and institution, prosperity has grown to excess and corrupt. It questions the worth of the self-made man, stressing moderation over conspicuous consumption. It questions the union between self-determination, autonomy, and progress and the manifestation of moral worth in America. It is this packaging of moral worth into the body of the disabled that Lya Graf, despite her charm and success, could not overcome—and it is the reason why we remember General Tom Thumb as a whimsical personality celebrated against the real-world stage of exclusion, discrimination, and control.

Indeed, bodies of the 19th Century were assimilated, caricatured, corseted, disciplined, exhibited, naturalized, normalized, medicalized, mapped, and mechanized. Sciences and pseudosciences together worked to increasingly scrutinize the body via anatomy, biology, phrenology, psychology, sexology, and statistics—creating a population of bodily discourses that traveled across the Atlantic and the world in colonial projects and new technologies. Bodies were simultaneously protected and regulated through labor and public health acts. Hospitals,

⁹² "Marriage A La Barnum." *The Brooklyn Eagle*, January 26, 1863. In *The Lost Museum Archive*. The City University of New York, 2017.

workhouses, and freak shows corralled and categorized. Painters, writers, and photographers populated their bodies of work with the blind, deaf, invalid, freak, and fragile—worrying about the bodies’ deviances as outwards signs of inner moral character.

Where there is a norm, there is a model. Where there exist bodies of knowledge constructed around these models, there survives that which defies and defines that norm. In *Sideshow U.S.A.*, Rachel Adams argues that “freak shows performed important cultural work by allowing ordinary people to confront, and master, the most extreme and terrifying forms of deviance they could imagine, from exotic dark-skinned people, to victims of war and disease, to ambiguously sexed bodies.”⁹³ They provided a stage for playing out many of America’s most charged social and political controversies, such as debates on race and empire, immigration, relations among the sexes, wealth inequality, and community standards of decency and norms.

The agenda of the Tom Thumb pamphlet serves to mitigate the potentially threatening implications of a secular American narrative that asserts that everyone can make money and rise in class. Because Thumb’s persona was such a construction developed around his own extraordinariness, his story speaks not to ‘hard work’ as a source of wealth. Instead, it points to the spectacle of transgressing social perceptions that deviant bodies occupied the margins—the economic freak of the successful, upper-class disabled body. But what makes the story of Thumb’s renown so fascinating is that the abandonment of Stratton’s origin story ultimately resists this narrative. If Charles Stratton’s biography also exposes the wondrous and dangerously duplicitous nature of capitalism in America, then the rags-to-riches prosperity narrative of the economic freak is a deception along the lines of P.T. Barnum’s own manipulation of a story propped upon a glorified and false hero that serves to define sociopolitical status and roles.

⁹³ Rachel Adams. *Sideshow U.S.A.: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*. (Chicago, Illinois: University of Chicago Press, 2001): 2-3.

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